

Between Men and Gods: Demons in Ancient Egypt

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It is a well known fact that religion plays a central role for the comprehension of ancient Egypt. However, there is still an aspect of the ancient Egyptian religion which has remained mostly neglected by scholars, and this is demonology.

In fact, in ancient Egyptian there is no term that could be translated as “demon” corresponding to the Greek *daimon*, while there is one for indicating god, *netjer*, which is the exact equivalent of the Greek *theos*. In contrast to the gods, demons were not worshipped (if not for a few cases related to the Late Period) but rather feared by the living.

Legions of ancient Egyptian demons can be divided into two categories: the demons populating the funerary realm, which are especially described and iconographically represented in funerary papyri of the Pharaonic Period and later, and demonic figures acting on earth, which are mentioned in particular in magical papyri including spells for protection against diseases and unpleasant occurrences in daily life, including phenomena of demonic possessions. Besides these papyrological sources, on which I have based my research until now, there are also other categories of objects and monuments where demonic beings are represented, such as magical statues, stelas, and the wall decorations of tombs and temples. It is these which I will be investigating in the future.

All in all, demons of the Realm of the Dead and those of the earthly world have been seldom compared in Egyptological studies, even though I am convinced that they present many more similarities than what may appear at first sight.

In particular, it is in the later phases of ancient Egyptian Pharaonic history, the so-called Late Period, running from about 715 to 332 BC and including the 25th-30th Dynasties, that demonic beings seem to gain a special place both in the official religion and in personal piety. A whole array of demonic beings also play a role in the religious practices of the post-Pharaonic period under the Greek and Roman rulers, lasting from 332 BC until 330 AD.

In these later phases of Egyptian history the relationship with the divine is especially characterized by a personal concern about malevolent supernatural powers which could interfere in everyday life on earth. This demonization of daily misfortune is mirrored by an increasing number of magical and ritual practices aimed at appeasing this unseen world of dangerous

spirits, spirits which are difficult to individuate within the official pantheon of the “great gods” of the Pharaonic tradition.

My research during my stay at the Italian Academy will focus on the sources – temple decoration, papyri, and magical and funerary objects (statues, coffins, stelae, etc.) – belonging to these later periods and bearing evidence of the belief in demons. Eventually, texts and iconography will be compared in order to define a typology of demons taking into account their epithets and iconographic attributes. The main emphasis will be placed on the classification of demons according to their functions within the hierarchy of supernatural beings playing a role in Late Period Egyptian religion.